

# Golfer Erik Compton finds second family through heart transplants

BY BILL VAN SMITH

*Special to the Miami Herald*

Compton is a two-time heart transplant recipient. His story touches the lives of other organ transplant recipients. He maintains a close relationship with parents of donor.

---



Erik Compton plays in the Memorial golf tournament Saturday, June 6, 2015, in Dublin, Ohio. **Jay LaPrete** AP

For Erik Compton, PGA Tour golfer, two heart transplants have given him the opportunity to play golf at the game's highest level.

At the same time, those two heart transplants created something much more important. They allowed Compton to enjoy and love a family, being with wife, Barbara, and seeing 7-year-old daughter Petra running around here, there and everywhere.

Life is good for Erik Compton. Life is valuable for Erik Compton.

"It's wonderful that I have been given the opportunity to have my family," Compton said.

And, and in some ways, those transplants gave him two families.

Another family that is extremely important to Compton, 36, is the Klostermans, Lillian and Jeff, of Ohio. It is the heart of their son, Isaac, who died in a Florida motorcycle accident, that now beats inside Compton.

In 2009, Compton met Lillian and Jeff in an Ohio restaurant after playing in Jack Nicklaus' Memorial Tournament.

"Isaac was competitive, adventurous and did his best in everything and didn't waste a minute of his life," his mother, Lillian, told ESPN, in an interview with her and her husband. "We're all thrilled Erik is the same kind of guy, and someone who is taking full advantage of the gift. "We don't consider it Isaac's heart now. It's Erik's heart. It's his. And we don't want him to feel any remorse that it came from our loss. I felt a closeness to Erik, as if he was one of my long-lost friends or relatives."

Said Jeff: “It was surreal to actually see him. It was great to shake Erik’s hand and give him a hug and know there’s someone who more than likely wouldn’t be there without my son’s heart. It’s strange to say, but it almost felt like he was part of the family.”

Meeting the parents of his donor also was an emotional day for Compton.

“That was a special moment for all of us,” Compton said. “It was not a sad day. It was a happy day. The Klostermans are great people — a very nice family. They are very aware of my golf career, and my mom speaks with them quite a bit, but we try to keep that private. We want to respect them.”

Before knowing who their son’s heart had been given to, the Klostermans had never played or followed golf. Now they are fans of the sport.

Guess who their favorite player is. You guessed right.

The fact that Compton has undergone two heart transplants, in 1992 and 2008, is well-known on the PGA Tour and by the fans who follow his career. The transplants were necessitated by viral cardiomyopathy, an inflammation of the heart causing lack of blood flow.

“I think most people identify me as a figure in the game who has had a transplant,” Compton said. “That’s the story. I don’t really try to hide from it. It really is who I am. For the fans who know about it, I hear that people are inspired. They think my story is an interesting, cool story.”

## **GIVING BACK**

Knowing full-well that he has been given a huge gift, life itself, Compton over the years has quietly tried to give back by helping others.

At golf tournaments, invariably there are transplant recipients who come up to Compton wanting to tell him — almost proudly — that they also had received a transplant. They want to share their journey with someone who can relate, and Compton is more than happy to step away from hitting range balls or rolling practice putts in order to listen.

“Happens all the time,” Compton said.

In addition, The Erik Compton Foundation now holds an annual golf tournament in conjunction with the First Tee of Miami to raise funds for increasing awareness and advocacy of organ donation. This year’s event is Tuesday at International Links-Melreese Country Club.

Compton was born in Miami, grew up in Miami, went to school in Miami until college, had both of his transplants in Miami and now lives in the Miami suburb of Coral Gables.

Talking about his chosen profession of playing golf, Compton said, “It’s a tough game that rewards you a little bit of the time and kicks your butt the rest. And I think that is what makes golf such a fun game. There are a lot of parallels between golf and my life.

“I have had my butt kicked by the game of life but I have turned it into a positive.”

## **SPECIAL DAY**

This past Friday was a special day for Compton as it was the 24th anniversary of his first heart transplant at age 12.

As might be expected, Compton was on a golf course, playing in the second round of the Honda Classic in Palm Beach Gardens.

While playing, he said he would take time to reflect about that day 24 years ago.

“There’s time out there to make room to think about things other than golf,” he offered.

Trying to identify or define himself, Compton said, “I think it’s fair enough to say I am a pretty normal person who goes about his business and has turned adversity into a positive. And that has allowed me to help people.”

For Compton, there are special moments he cherishes, possibly more so than most people because of what he has been through.

One of those moments was on the Monday before the Honda tournament. Compton didn't prepare for the tournament with his swing coach or by practicing on the range. Instead, he and daughter Petra played 18 holes together at Melreese. Compton was asked how many strokes he gave her. "Nah," Compton said, "she had to give me strokes." Yes, there is no doubt. Life is good for Erik Compton. Life is valuable for Erik Compton.

